



April 4, 2025

The Honorable Doug Collins
Secretary
Department of Veterans Affairs
810 Vermont Avenue NW
Washington, DC 20420

RE: U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs - Pause

Secretary Collins,

On behalf of the undersigned national organizations collectively serving all 574 sovereign federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) Tribal Nations and all 41 urban Indian organizations (UIOs), we write to express concern over the pause placed on the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs (Committee) as noted in the March 27, 2025 letter from Committee members. The Committee not only plays a crucial role in ensuring that the VA is responsive to the unique needs of AI/AN veterans but also works to ensure that the VA fulfills the trust and treaty obligations owed to AI/AN veterans. We emphasize that the Committee is a statutory requirement, and the Secretary, or the Secretary's designee, is legally required to meet with the Committee in-person at least twice each year. We request that the VA exempt the Committee from this pause to ensure that it can continue its advisory work as mandated by federal law.

Background on AI/AN Service Members

AI/ANs have served in the United States military in every major armed conflict in the Nation's history and have traditionally served at a higher rate than any other ethnic group in the United States.¹ This includes at least 9,000 Native American men who served the United States in World War One, before this country granted universal citizenship to American Indians and, who suffered a casualty rate five times higher than the total force; 42,000 AI/ANs who served in the Vietnam War, representing twenty-five percent of the entire AI/AN population at the time; and over 33,000 AI/ANs who have served following September 11, 2001.² Today, more than 145,000 AI/AN veterans live in the United States.³

AI/AN Veterans and the Trust Responsibility

¹ DeSimone, D. (2021, November 8). *A History of Military Service: Native Americans in the U.S. Military Yesterday and Today*. United Service Organizations. <https://www.uso.org/stories/2914-a-history-of-military-service-native-americans-in-the-u-s-military-yesterday-and-today>

² See U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, American Indian and Alaska Native Veterans, 2017 27-28 (May 2020),

<https://www.va.gov/vetdata/docs/SpecialReports/AIAN.pdf> ; Tanya Thatcher, James Ring Adams & Anne Bolen, Patriot Nations: Native Americans in Our Nation's Armed Forces, 17 American Indian Magazine 3 (2016),

<https://www.americanindianmagazine.org/story/patriotnations-native-americans-our-nations-armed-forces>.

³ VA Veteran Population Projection Model, 2018: https://www.va.gov/vetdata/veteran_population.asp.

In return for their military service, the United States promised all veterans, including AI/AN veterans, “exceptional health care that improves their health and well-being.”⁴ The federal government’s responsibility to provide exceptional health care to AI/AN veterans extends beyond that owed to them in return for their military service. The federal government has a unique government-to-government relationship with Tribes. Born out of that relationship are the legal Trust and Treaty responsibility owed to federally recognized Tribes to “maintain and improve the health of the Indians.”⁵ The government-to-government relationship is repeatedly upheld in the Constitution, statutes, Supreme Court cases, and other legal precedents. Most recently, the Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (PL 116-315) (Act) directed the VA and the Secretary of the VA “to work with other Federal agencies and Congress so that Native American veterans are not denied the full benefit of their status as both Native Americans and veterans.”⁶

Background on the Advisory Committee on Tribal and Indian Affairs

Established by the Isakson and Roe Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020⁷ = (Act), the Committee plays a crucial role in ensuring that the federal Treaty and Trust responsibilities are upheld and that the unique needs of AI/AN veterans are addressed. The Committee provides advice and guidance to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs on all matters relating to Indian tribes, tribal organizations, Native Hawaiian organizations and Native American Veterans. The Committee further works with the Secretary to ensure AI/AN veterans “are not denied the full benefit of their status as both Native Americans and veterans.”⁸ The Act not only establishes duties for the Committee, but also establishes a required meeting schedule for the Committee and the Secretary, dictating that “the Committee shall meet in-person with the Secretary, or the Secretary’s designee, not less frequently than twice each year and hold monthly conference calls as necessary.”⁹ Therefore, the VA is required not only by the federal trust and treaty obligations, but also federal law to ensure that the Committee is able to carry out its essential functions. By preventing the Committee from convening with the Secretary, the pause disrupts the essential functions of the Committee. We therefore request that the VA exempted the Committee from the pause and allow the Committee to continue its work and schedule its next statutorily required meeting as soon as possible.

Conclusion

The health, well-being, and fair treatment of AI/AN veterans depend on the continued functioning of this Committee, and the federal government must act in good faith to honor its promises to these dedicated service members. We thank you for your time and attention to this matter, and stand ready to provide any support necessary to address this matter quickly and efficiently.

Sincerely,

National Indian Health Board
National Congress of American Indians
Self-Governance Communication and Education Tribal Consortium
National Council of Urban Indian Health

⁴ Veterans Health Administration, About VHA, <https://www.va.gov/health/aboutVHA.asp>.

⁵ 25 U.S.C. § 1601(1)

⁶ 38 USC § 547(f)(7)

⁷ PL 116-315; 38 USC § 547

⁸ 38 USC § 547(f)(7)

⁹ 38 USC § 547(d)(1)(B).